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New Media in Southeast Asia: Concepts and Research Implications

Dayana Lengauer

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“New media technologies [have] altered the infrastructures and rhythms of everyday life” (Horst, 2012, p. 62) – this is true not only for technology-driven metropolitan areas in East Asia or the USA, but also, and particularly, for those Southeast Asian countries that hold some of the largest numbers of social media users in the world. Yet, contrary to popular expectations of an interconnected global network society (Castells, 1996), a number of ethnographic studies have exposed the rather unorthodox ways in which digital technologies have become part of the daily dynamics of social, cultural, and political life that depend largely on particular regional settings, infrastructures, offline relationships, and other aspects of locality (Hine, 2000, p. 27; Horst, 2013, pp. 149-151; Horst & Miller, 2006; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Miller, 2011; Miller & Slater, 2000; Postill, 2011; Servaes, 2014; Slater, 2013). Focusing on *New Media in Southeast Asia*, this issue contributes to this project of “provincializing” (Coleman, 2010, p. 489) digital media, particularly social media, by following the ways in which people go about organizing their social, cultural, and political lives in largely institutionalized and conflict-laden environments.

Directing their focus toward the political participation of urban middle classes in authoritarian and post-authoritarian regimes, the authors of this special issue explore the ways in which different actors set the parameters for participation in digital space, and seize digital media for their socio-political and cultural agendas. This approach allows them to avoid media-centric generalizations and various forms of technological determinism associated with the early work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan and others (Baym, 2015, pp. 27-44). Without disregarding the importance of external forces, such as political centralization, bureaucratization, and urbanization, as well as their regional particularities, contributions place a strong emphasis on the agency of Internet users. Hence, digital media feed into, reflect, and shape “symbolic struggles over the perception of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 20) by allowing for new types of exchange and socialities to emerge “across the gap between the virtual and the actual” (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 52).

While contributions to this issue deploy the terms digital and social media by addressing concrete, non-analog technologies and applications, such as the Internet or Facebook, the term *new media* is rarely discussed in detail. Inquiring what makes new media *new*, Ilana Gershon (2010, p. 10) goes well beyond the factual innovations introduced by what we know today as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2007; see also Ellison & boyd, 2013). Rather than the technologies themselves,

she argues, it is people's perceptions of and experiences with social media (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) that define them as new. Internet users, as Hine (2000) poses in her book *Virtual Ethnography*, are involved in the construction of digital technology both "through the practices by which they understand it and through the content they produce" (p. 38). Once embedded in everyday practices, new media and their accompanying infrastructures may appear mundane and transparent to users. Yet, emerging forms of social interaction through and with digital media do not go without a fair amount of anxieties related to these media (Baym, 2015, p. 22; Gershon, 2010, pp. 80-81), as they potentially challenge previously established technologies and patterns of exchange (Campbell, 2010, p. 9).

Madianou and Miller (2011) encountered similar suspicion among Filipino domestic workers in London who today could be defined as "the real vanguard troops in marching towards the digital future" (Miller & Horst, 2012, p. 10). Formulating their concept of *polymedia*, the authors explore the ways in which diverse media contribute to the emotional repertoire of Filipino mothers in their communication with their children back in the Philippines. Challenging prevailing ideas that technology determines and transforms social interaction, studies like this indicate that the choice of the medium rarely depends on its technological features alone (Broadbent, 2012). On the contrary, media become mediated by relationships just as much as relationships are mediated by media (Madianou & Miller, 2011, p. 148). This assumption goes not only for interpersonal relationships but also for relations between the state and its citizens (Horst, 2013).

Although digital technologies are still out of reach in some areas in the world today (Coleman, 2010), polymedia seems to be the predominant condition of communication in most parts of Southeast Asia. This condition runs along the availability of several channels of communication, including social networking sites, blogs, email newsletters, voice calls, and so forth. Despite startling technological developments, particularly in the *technopolitan*¹ state of Singapore or in the capital cities of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, digital divides related to Internet connection and costly infrastructure continue to exist (see Einzenberger, this issue) and often point toward the "more fine-grained issues of social and economic status and access" (Tacchi, 2012, p. 227). Development models that often hinge on the arguably interactive, participatory, and democratic perspectives that Web 2.0 technologies open (Castells, 2009), overlook the more "informal ways in which consumers and providers of services and platforms come to subvert, resist, and reconfigure mobile media infrastructures" (Horst, 2013, p. 151). As a number of scholars have argued, the availability of new media does not prescribe the development of a participatory culture (Lim, 2013; Tacchi, 2012). Moreover, as we can draw from a number of cases in Indonesia today,² social

1 Technopolitan comes from the term *technopolis*, coined by science journalist Nigel Calder (1969) to describe "a society not only shaped but continuously modified in drastic ways by scientific and technical novelty" (p. 22). Later it became a theoretical paradigm for regional technology-based development (see Smilor, Kozmetsky, & Gibson, 1988).

2 Media coverage on the recent rally that took place on 4 November in the streets of Jakarta and targeted Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, for alleged blasphemy reflected on the low mobilization capacity of particular segments of society. As Muhammad Fajar (2016) observed, those who opposed the protest "often intelligibly discuss complicated democracy-related concepts on social media but fail to back these up with a vigorous movement on the ground". Both massive online and offline mo-

media activism does not always yield the support of the masses or translate into a vast offline movement (see also Schäfer, this issue). Since digital media cultures evolve within the complex fabrics of society and more encompassing systems of power relations, these scholars invite for a more “careful analysis of political processes and their digital dimensions” (Postill, 2012, p. 178). This process-oriented approach goes beyond dualistic conceptualizations of online (virtual) and offline (physical) space as two distinct and sovereign arenas of action (Lim, 2015) and direct attention toward those gaps between the virtual and the actual in which emerging socialities and new forms of social interaction take form (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 52).

The notion of sociality lies at the bottom of much social media scholarship (Pink et al., 2016). Yet, as Baym (2015) and others argue, being ‘social’ is not the main qualifier of social media that makes them different from earlier forms of mediated communications, including Internet forums or online chatrooms: “What makes ‘social media’ significant as a category is not the technology, but, rather, the socio-technical dynamics that unfolded as millions of people embrace the technology and used it to collaborate, share information, and socialize” (Ellison & boyd, 2013). In Indonesia, for example, social networking sites like Facebook “allow people to return to certain kinds of intense and interwoven forms of social relationship that they otherwise feared were being lost” (Miller, 2012, p. 148). This is also evident in a number of migration and diaspora studies focusing on social media practices among members of migrant communities (Madianou & Miller, 2011; McKay, 2011; Panagakos & Horst, 2006).

The social impacts of the Internet and social media are best understood as the “result of the organic interaction between technology and social, political, and cultural structures and relationships” (Lim, 2013, p. 637). This interaction is the focal point of the contributions to this issue. In their papers, Pinkaew Laungaramsri and Wolfram Schaffar respectively build on earlier observations that “social media tools can simultaneously support grass-roots political mobilizations as well as government surveillance and human rights violations” (Coleman, 2010, p. 493). Both follow Evgeny Morozov’s (2011) critique on the idea that new media inevitably advance democracy and freedom and show how digital technologies have been used by the Thai state and military to identify ‘traitors’ of the regime and suppress political dissent. In the light of ‘cyber dystopia’ created in the aftermaths of the 2014 coup d’état, Pinkaew analyzes the interplay between state institutions, social media, and popular uses arguing that the ongoing militarization of cyberspace has been accomplished through the combination of mass surveillance and “surveillance by the masses”. She casts a closer look at the state-initiated programs Cyber Scouts and Cyber Witch Hunts as the forerunners of an emergent right-wing movement carried by individuals and ultra-royalist groups and working as a counter-movement against perceived anti-monarchy networks. Much in line with Pinkaew’s analysis, Wolfram Schaffar demonstrates how in the context of Thailand’s military regime, Facebook has become the ‘battleground’ of competing political camps. In his investigation of the online formation and opera-

bilization against Ahok, and its missing offline elements among those who opposed the rally, prove Lim’s (2013) observations that social media activism is only prone to translate in offline mobilization when “its narratives are simple, associated with low risk actions and congruent with dominant meta-narratives, such as nationalism and religiosity” (p. 636).

tion of 'fascist vigilante groups' on the Internet, he shows how features of new media technologies that might be considered supportive with regard to political mobilization can become 'dangerous' in the hands of right-wing groups.

Communication technologies are not automatically political, but the use of digital media can doubtlessly become politically meaningful (Coleman, 2010; Postill, 2012). Analyzing the political expressions and social media rhetoric of Thai women during the 2013/2014 Bangkok political protests, Olivia Guntarik and Verity Trott demonstrate the ways in which the rise of digital media use has altered the trajectories of political experience and the configurations of political participation. The authors argue that in the context of Thailand's conflict-laden political environment, social and digital media enable Thai women to 'speak out' in ways they would not have been able to without the Internet.

The plurality of voices, reinforced by Web 2.0 participatory architectures, has been central in narratives concerning processes of democratization (Couldry, 2010; Shirky, 2011). Yet, as Saskia Schäfer shows in her contribution to this issue, the 'act' to present oneself and the 'right' to express an opinion are informed not only by local structures but also by transnational agendas and their popular rhetoric. In her inquiry into social media practices of Indonesian atheist activists, Schäfer illustrates how activists' commitment to a non-religious identity and to the right to freedom of non-religious expression, reinforces exclusive understandings of difference and braces existing cultural and social divides. The increased visibility of non-belief facilitated through the offensive use of social media by non-religious actors and the attention of international media and donor agencies given to their activism – in a state defined by the belief in God as well as local narratives of religious harmony – has increased public suspicion and enhanced processes of 'sectarianization'.

In their discussion of social media, all four contributions point at the significance of online communication platforms when offline forms of activism and other forms of social and political participation are restricted or otherwise remain limited. Yet, their analyses do not hold still at the enabling forces and architectures of digital technologies that accompany activists and other groups of people in perilous political environments. Rather, they inquire into the wider effects and implications these technologies and their appropriation bring along for different actors and their 'revolutionary', and at times sweeping, projects.

Since digital media have become intrinsic to both the institutions that structure and the practices that organize social and political life, the rise of online activism is indicative for on-going transformations within political landscapes and state-citizen relationships. In his study of digital acts of 'witnessing' and 'flaming' against the 'political dynasty' of Banten – a province on the island of Java in Indonesia – Muhammad Zamzam Fauzanafi points at emergent practices of digital citizenship that are not easily framed in traditional understandings of state-citizen relations. Much in line with Guntarik and Trott, he pleads for a reconsideration of what it means to be politically engaged in a digital age, adhering to changing forms of citizenship that develop along autonomous forms of expression and loose networks of social interaction and are accompanied by a broader mistrust toward politicians. While inquiring into alternative spaces of political participation and civic engagement, contributions to this issue indicate the strident rise of hate speech in social media as they become sites for

the open expression of discontent and what Fauzanafi frames as civic disgust. Notwithstanding this trend in Southeast Asian political contexts, Sirima Thongsawang sketches increasing horizontal processes of communication and multiple possibilities of information exchange in her study among Thai immigrants living in Berlin and their respective local organizations.

In an interview with Phyu Phyu Thi and Htaike Htaike Aung, co-founders of *Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation* (MIDO), Rainer Einzenberger discusses popular interpretations of the Internet and the local use of social media. As the interviewees explain, in Myanmar digital technologies and new media only recently hit the market, and Facebook is largely perceived as a legitimate news channel. While the Internet is the “central conduit and node” (Coleman, 2010, p. 495) for the work of both freelance journalists and news agencies, the difference between quality news and light package information (Lim, 2013) may not be clear under particular circumstances.

A short contribution reports on a workshop that focused on social media and Islamic practice in Southeast Asia and took place in Vienna early this year. The workshop was organized by researchers from the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and invited presenters from four continents to reflect on the particular case of Indonesia.

Outside the focus on new media, this issue features an article by Joseph A. L. Reyes in the field of demography and population studies that explores relations of leisure time activities with sociodemographic indicators of subjective happiness and health in the Philippines. Here, the Internet is mentioned only marginally as a leisure activity that is deemed rather costly and involving high personal expense.

Seeking scholarly discussion of how various offline contexts affect the production and reach of new media, contributions to this issue cover a variety of analytic frames and aspects of digital Southeast Asia, with topics ranging from Internet vigilantism to ideologies of cultural difference. Focusing predominantly on Thailand and Indonesia, they reveal the remarkable depth and earnest implications of digital media in everyday and institutional life and give arresting insights into those dimensions of state-citizen relations that often remain veiled.



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